UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON
REFUGEES FLEEING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Wednesday, February 10, 2021

10:30 a.m.

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Gayle Manchin, Chair
Tony Perkins, Vice Chair
Anurima Bhargava, Vice Chair
Gary L. Bauer
James W. Carr
Nadine Maenza
Nury Turkel

C O N T E N T S

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MANCHIN: Good morning, and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution. I want to start by first of all thanking our distinguished witnesses for joining us today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor the freedom of religion, or belief, abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual meeting.

In its preamble, IRFA notes that many of our nation's founders who fled religious

persecution abroad cherished religious freedom. In honor of this heritage, IRFA includes several provisions related to asylum seekers and refugees, with particular attention to those individuals who have fled severe violations of religious freedom.

Since USCIRF's creation, we have monitored the implementation of those provisions and paid special attention to the plight of those displaced due to religious persecution.

Continuing this work, we will discuss today how the U.S. government can better protect and support these individuals.

It's now my pleasure to turn it over to Vice Chair Perkins to discuss USCIRF's work on refugee issues. Tony.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you very much, Chair Manchin.

I would like to join the chairwoman in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

As Chair Manchin mentioned, USCIRF, guided by IRFA, has a rich history of advocating on behalf

of refugees fleeing religious persecution and making recommendations for how the U.S. government can better aid them.

USCIRF, we have consistently called for maintaining the annual refugee resettlement ceiling at its typical levels and ensuring implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment.

USCIRF welcomes the fact that the Biden administration has indicated that it intends to significantly raise the refugee ceiling from its current historic low, alongside increasing the number of refugees that we open our doors to each year, and I look forward to putting the meat on the bones of this and exploring what else is needed to ensure the success of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, especially as it focuses in on assisting the most vulnerable, those in particular that are fleeing because of religious persecution.

I will now turn this over to Vice Chair Bhargava to discuss the importance of humanitarian assistance and USCIRF's work on the asylum process.

And Vice Chair Bhargava will also introduce our witnesses today.

Anurima.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins.

As Vice Chair Perkins mentioned, the U.S. refugee resettlement program is a vital lifeline for those fleeing religious persecution. A focus of USCIRF's work has been, as Chair Manchin noted, the asylum process.

For the past two decades, USCIRF has conducted assessments and made recommendations regarding the asylum process. In particular, the International Religious Freedom Act authorized USCIRF to examine whether the expedited removal process is being implemented in a manner consistent with the United States' obligations to protect individuals fleeing persecution.

USCIRF issued reports on expedited removal in 2005, 2007, 2013, and 2016, and documented major problems and flaws that successive administrations

have yet to address.

The expedited removal process increasingly in recent years has been expanded and weaponized to prevent asylum seekers from even receiving hearings. This use of the expedited removal process and the placement of asylum seekers in immigration detention facilities, coupled with many other measures, have raised additional concerns about the protections afforded to the most vulnerable and those fleeing religious persecution.

Other measures include the implementation of the so-called "Muslim" ban that impacts countries and communities where religious violence and persecution have escalated; the slowing down of processing and the building of massive backlogs; and heightened, quote-unquote, "extreme" vetting, which raises questions at minimum about restrictions and biases towards those facing religious persecution.

We look forward to hearing about and engaging with our witnesses on policy and process

recommendations to address those concerns.

Ultimately, only a small number of the world's almost 80 million displaced persons will resettle in a third country. For this reason, USCIRF has also continuously called on the U.S. government to support humanitarian efforts to aid refugees.

To enhance these efforts, we will hear recommendations from our witnesses on how to improve overseas assistance to displaced populations and the communities hosting them, and how to help create conditions that would allow them to return home.

I would now like to briefly introduce our witnesses. I will keep my introductions short so that we can have as much time as possible for discussion. More detailed bios of the witnesses can be found on USCIRF's website.

Our first witness today is Jenny Yang, Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at World Relief.

Next, we will hear from Mark Hetfield, President and CEO at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS.

Leon Rodriguez, who is an immigration attorney at Seyfarth and the former Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and my former colleague from the U.S. Department of Justice, will follow.

And our fourth speaker will be Elizabeth Neumann, who is a Senior Advisor at the National Immigration Forum and former Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security at DHS.

Lastly, we will hear from Murad Ismael, co-founder and former Executive Director at Yazda.

I would now like to give the floor to our esteemed witnesses. Ms. Yang, please begin.

MS. YANG: Thank you so much. I want to thank the Commission for holding this important and timely hearing on refugees who are fleeing religious persecution.

At a time when 80 million people are forcibly displaced around the world, the highest number in recorded history, strong U.S. leadership is needed now more than ever to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to those who are persecuted and to promote international religious freedom abroad.

World Relief is the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, which was founded over 70 years ago in response to local churches in the United States that wanted to serve those who were displaced by the war.

Since that time, we currently work in 14 countries around the world, responding to humanitarian crises, and we work in 17 communities across the United States to resettle refugees, oftentimes in partnership with a local church.

What we know right now is that religious persecution is worsening globally with the Pew Research Center finding that in 2018 government restrictions on religion reached the highest level

in more than a decade.

Globally, more than 340 million Christians live in places where high levels of persecution on account of their faith means that many of these individuals have had to flee. Other faith groups, including Muslims, Jews, Yezidis and Sikhs, also face harsh discrimination, detention, and even killings where there is limited freedom of religion.

The nexus between the lack of religious freedom and forced migration is undeniable. The lack of religious freedom oftentimes fuels migration, and strong and effective U.S. foreign policy must address both the need to amplify religious freedom abroad and the need to strengthen protection for those who have been forced to flee for lack of religious freedom in their home countries.

The United States has traditionally made religious freedom a priority of domestic and foreign policy, but because religious persecution

continues to drive the displacement of many around the world, such commitments necessitate an equally enduring responsibility to provide protection to refugees and asylum seekers, and the need and a recognition to provide protection to those who are fleeing persecution means that we must amplify and support our religious freedom agenda as well.

In Burma, for example, ethnic Chin, including many Chin Christian pastors, face violence and abduction. The mostly Muslim Rohingya have fled Rakhine state in Burma in large numbers, and an estimated nearly one million Rohingya refugees live in camps in the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh. More than half of them are children.

In Syria and Iraq, ISIS remains a threat to religious minorities, including Christians and Yezidis, and over five million Syrian refugees have been driven from their homes in a nearly decade of conflict.

In Iran, Christians are imprisoned for their faith and Baha'is and Mandeans face regular

discrimination. And in Eritrea, where only four religious communities are legally permitted to operate, many individuals have fled to the surrounding areas in order to find protection.

There is ongoing attention to the Uighurs in China as an estimated 800,000 Uighurs are detained in re-education camps within the country and tens of thousands have been forced to flee.

In Pakistan, blasphemy laws and forced conversions have meant that Christians, Hindus and Sikhs have been violently attacked and detained in solitary confinement.

A recent report by the Boat People SOS and Jubilee Campaign have found that 1,600 Pakistani refugees, most of them Ahmadi Muslims and Christians, are in Thailand with ongoing protection concerns.

World Relief has been advocating for a Pakistani Christian man whose wife was resettled as a refugee to Spokane, Washington four years ago. This man was beaten for publishing Christian

material on a website and has been waiting as a refugee in Sri Lanka to eventually reunite with his wife.

This compelling story was featured in The Wall Street Journal and Christianity Today because for over four years, we have been advocating for this individual to be resettled and reunited with his wife in the United States of America.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program was created with bipartisan support in 1980 to respond to such political and religious conflicts to provide a place of safety and refuge to those who are fleeing religious persecution and have nowhere else to go. And it has been a lifeline of protection for those who are fleeing religious persecution.

For example, over the past many decades, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has admitted large numbers of Burmese, Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian and Eritrean refugees before significant restrictions were placed on the program in 2017.

Religious minorities make up the majority of refugees resettled from Burma and Iran over the past decade and roughly 35 percent of those who are coming from Iraq.

The United States' ability to respond to such threats and offer protections for a strong and flexible refugee admission program is a direct indicator of our commitment to human rights and international religious freedom and will have a direct impact on our ability to promote democracy and religious freedom abroad.

But in order for the United States to fulfil that commitment, significant changes must be made to the program. Refugees of various religious traditions have been significantly impacted by the sharp reduction in U.S. refugee resettlement over the past several years.

In the recent report that World Relief released with Open Doors USA, we found that there has been an 83 percent decline in the number of Christian refugees that have been resettled from 50

countries that are on the Open Doors World Watch List for Christian persecution.

And in addition, we found that other religious minority groups have been effectively shut out of the program over the past several years.

For example, there has been 100 percent decline in the number of Jewish refugees that have been resettled from Iran and Iraq. There has been an 87 percent decline in the number of Baha'i refugees from Iran. There has been an 86 percent decline of Yezidi refugees coming from Iraq and Syria. And an 85 percent decline of Muslim refugees, mostly Rohingya, that are being resettled from Burma.

These sharp declines should be alarming to all of us because the only durable solution that many of these refugees have is not to be able to return back home or to locally integrate, but to find a place of safety and refuge where they can practice their religion freely.

The United States High Commissioner of Refugees estimates 1.4 million refugees are in need of resettlement, and that last year was the lowest number in 20 years in which they saw refugees resettled to any nation around the world.

As religious persecution rises around the world, the U.S. must do more to preserve this lifeline of protection for those who have nowhere else to go.

President Biden's recent Executive Order did significant changes to the Refugee Resettlement Program, not only by proposing an increased refugee ceiling to 62,500 for this fiscal year but identifying specific refugee groups who are religious minorities, who should be specially designated through the program. This includes Rohingya refugees from Burma, Uighurs from China, as well as Iranian religious minorities who are waiting in Austria to be resettled to the United States of America.

In addition to these significant changes,

the White House should work with Congress to appropriate robust funding through the Migration and Refugee Assistance Account for which World Relief and other members of Refugee Council USA have recommended 4.52 billion to help those overseas who cannot be resettled, as well as to support the Refugee Resettlement Program in the United States of America.

The ability for the U.S. to effectively promote religious freedom is directly tied to our ability to welcome and provide protection to those who are fleeing religious persecution.

At a time of unprecedented forced migration, the U.S. has a moral responsibility to do as much as it can to meet the needs of our vulnerable neighbors.

As the Commission explores the challenges and opportunities associated with helping refugees fleeing religious persecution, World Relief looks forward to working with you to meet these objectives.

And I look forward to responding to your questions after the testimonies.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you.

Can we turn to Mark, please?

MR. HETFIELD: Thank you very much.

It really is a pleasure to be here today. I am a proud former staffer of USCIRF, having directed the Commission's refugee and asylum work from 2003 to 2006.

But today I represent HIAS, which is a global, faith-based refugee agency. HIAS used to welcome refugees because they were Jewish, but today we welcome refugees because we are Jewish.

In Title VI of IRFA, Congress recognized that all asylum seekers and refugees are in the same proverbial boat, whether they flee their homeland due to persecution on account of religion, race, nationality, political opinion or social group.

To be sure, Congress is decades past due in fulfilling its responsibility to reform our

broken asylum, refugee and immigration systems, and to better protect refugees this needs to be done, especially those refugees who flee religious persecution.

But even without legislation, the executive branch can and should do far more to protect refugees and asylum seekers. President Biden is off to a good start, but it is just a start.

Early in his presidency, Donald Trump promised to end what he called unfair treatment of Christian refugees. Indeed, the percentage of refugees resettled to the U.S. who were Christian soared from 44 percent in 2016 to 79 percent in 2019.

But the actual number of Christians resettled plummeted during that time by 36 percent, from 37,521 to 23,754. This underscores that the best way to help more refugees who fled religious persecution is to help more refugees, not to replace one form of discrimination with another.

For that reason, HIAS welcomed President Biden's stated intention to resettle 125,000 refugees in FY2022, up from 15,000 this year, the lowest refugee ceiling in the history of the refugee program.

HIAS also welcomes President Biden's EO to promptly permit the use of video-conferencing to expand refugee adjudication capacity.

In a pandemic, remote interviews are the only way that a DHS officer can safely access many refugee applicants. Yet, DHS regulations have never allowed this.

Likewise, HIAS embraces the Biden administration's plan, described in my written testimony in more detail, to reunite many more refugee families, including those who flee religious persecution.

With regard to security vetting issues addressed by other witnesses, since 2001, the United States resettled without any incident that I know of over 33,000 Iranian Jewish, Christian,

Baha'i, Mandaean, and other Iranian religious minorities, processed with HIAS' assistance in Vienna, Austria.

Since February 2017, presumably due to complications related to U.S. vetting procedures, this longstanding escape route has been totally shut down--not by Iran but by the United States.

I'm relieved that the Biden administration is reporting progress toward reopening the safe escape route for Iranian religious minorities, but again it remains closed.

We also welcome the review--we welcome review for that reason of security vetting that President Biden promised in his recent Executive Order.

We also welcome President Biden's specific promise to improve resettlement access for religious minorities, as Jenny referred to, from Syria and Iraq, for Uighurs from China, and for Rohingya from Burma.

Now turning to asylum seekers, in Section

605 of IRFA, Congress authorized USCIRF to report on the treatment of all asylum seekers subject to expedited removal, including those fleeing religious persecution.

On February 2, President Biden issued another Executive Order mandating a 120-day comprehensive review of expedited removal. But you, USCIRF, has already completed two such extensive reviews, the first in 2005, which I directed, and a second in 2016.

I urge you to engage with the Biden administration to ensure that it addresses your many recommendations, and I just highlight a few here.

One, DHS should end its practice of putting all arriving asylum seekers in jail-like facilities and actual jails, a practice that has essentially criminalized asylum in the United States.

Two, DHS should record all sworn statements taken and implement meaningful quality

assurance procedures in reviewing those statements. And as USCIRF documented so well, DHS officers are simply not following their own procedures, and asylum seekers are being returned or treated inappropriately as a result.

Three, we need to end refugee roulette in the immigration courts. The Department of Justice should implement quality assurance measures to ensure that the outcome of an asylum case is dependent, not on the bias of the judge, but on the strength of the asylum claim.

Four, we need to ensure that the asylum seekers have access to some form of legal assistance so they stand a chance in court.

USCIRF found that asylum seekers with representation have an 11-times greater chance of getting relief than one without representation.

And five, lastly, there needs to be a high-level official at DHS empowered and resourced to coordinate the many moving parts of expedited removal as it affects asylum seekers in order to

ensure fairness and accountability.

And there is one more recent element since the USCIRF studies that warrants your attention. Under international and U.S. law, as USCIRF knows, a person who expresses a fear of return cannot be turned away without being screened. But on March 20th, the Trump Administration used the pandemic to justify turning away all asylum seekers at the border under an old public health law.

The Biden administration has continued using this Title 42 to exclude adult asylum seekers. In 2005 and 2016, USCIRF extensively documented that the United States is violating its own laws in its treatment of arriving asylum seekers.

Not only has this problem continued unabated through four presidential administrations since the USCIRF study, but under Title 42 now the inappropriate treatment of asylum seekers has been raised to a whole new level.

I really want to thank the Commission for

its commitment to religious freedom, to refugee protection, and for this opportunity to testify. And I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Mr. Hetfield.

Let me now turn to Leon Rodriguez.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Good morning.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me to talk about this very important topic. And I'd like to start by sharing that among the most gratifying and proudest professional experiences of my life was the work that we did while I was Director of USCIS in safely screening, admitting, and ultimately integrating tens of thousands of refugees from all over the world.

That is far less my accomplishment, but very much the accomplishment of the many refugee officers, intelligence analysts, resettlement centers employees, UN employees who played such a critical part in making that very complex process work.

If I have to--I've been asked this morning to talk about the security vetting process, and I think it's important to start with one very simple headline: the vetting process has worked to prevent threats to the U.S., not just from refugees, but from other immigrant populations as well.

Now that is system that needs to be constantly evolving with tools added and removed based on risks as those risks evolve. And when we talk about evolving risks, that assessment needs to be one conducted by the intelligence and law enforcement professionals who are experts in that area, and what we need to avoid is making those assessments based on either prejudice or sensationalist media reports.

The vetting process that existed during the time that I was USCIS Director, and the core of which has survived through the last four years, since I stepped down from government service, is a multi-layered process that has a number of redundancies built in to ensure its effectiveness.

In my written testimony, I talked at length about the data-based, intelligence-based vetting tools available to USCIS officers as they conduct screenings of refugees, whether it be in refugee camps in Africa, in resettlement centers in Turkey, in Egypt, or anywhere else in the world.

What's important to understand about those databases is they are populated by all of the best information available to our intelligence services. There are, in fact, a number of classified techniques utilized in developing the information as part of those databases.

And then, in fact, the information contained therein has, in fact, in many instances, resulted in the exclusion of literally thousands of people, many of whom probably were entirely innocent, but nonetheless suspect because of that information has resulted in their exclusion from coming to the U.S.

I want to focus, though, in a little bit greater length on one particular aspect of the

vetting process that is misunderstood and badly underestimated. And that is the role of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services refugee services officers in conducting the screenings of refugees coming to the U.S.

I had spent most of my career prior to becoming USCIS Director in law enforcement. I was a prosecutor in New York City, working with New York City homicide detectives. I was a Department of Justice lawyer and Assistant U.S. Attorney and worked with FBI agents from all over the country.

I am comfortable saying that USCIS refugee services officers are the equal of all the law enforcement based interviewers/interrogators that I met during the course of my career. Their training is certainly on par with theirs, but more importantly their preparation to go into the field to conduct interviews is, in fact, far stronger than what I see in law enforcement.

Refugee officers are thoroughly briefed, based on both classified and publicly available

sources on conditions in the countries down to the very locality where a refugee may be coming from on conditions in those countries.

For particular populations, back then, in particular, Syrian refugees, specific questions were developed for those refugees in coordination with our Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate at USCIS. So rather than this being a game of he said/she said, in fact, very prepared, very well-trained interviewers and interrogators conduct the security screenings during the course of the refugee admission process.

And the system has worked. We admitted well over 100,000 Iraqi refugees, on the order of a little bit over 20,000 Syrian refugees. And I point out these particular countries because the biggest threat we were facing, the globe was facing, during the time of admission of these refugees, was ISIS, which was heavily present in both those countries.

Nonetheless, we were able to screen those

refugees sufficiently effectively that as we sit here in 2021, four, four-and-a-half years after--five, six, seven years, even more, of those individuals admitted, not a single one of them has been charged with or otherwise documented to be involved in either an attempt, conspiracy or actual crime of violence of a terrorist nature directed against the United States.

So I think this is something that we need to keep in mind. You asked one of the questions, I know you want to hear from us, is, is what is the new administration going to need? What is the federal government going to need?

And I think one of the things that is going to be very critical, particularly in this coming year, is to rebuild the refugee services officer corps at USCIS. It has because of the declining levels of admissions during the past four years, many of those individuals, properly so, have been reallocated, conducting screenings at the southwest U.S. border.

That points to what I expect. I don't know the specific numbers, but it's something that does deserve examination, that the actual boots-on-the-ground capability of the refugee corps is, has deteriorated. And that is something that needs to be an area of critical focus for the new administration, is to train, brief and deploy refugee officers as soon as they can.

I want to conclude by pointing out that the obligation to offer welcome to religious, to religious refugees, asylum seekers, is not simply a humanitarian and moral obligation. It is very much that. But to echo comments, the opening comments from Ms. Yang, it is a critical element of how the United States is seen around the world.

Until very recently, the United States distinguished itself by being the country that admitted the largest numbers of refugees from all over. In fact, I myself am the child of refugees who benefited from that leadership into the United States.

It's also, refugee admission is a key element of global security, in part because it is an element of how the U.S. is perceived, but also because of displacement of 80 million people throughout the world is itself a global security challenge that deserves to be addressed.

To conclude, I want to thank the panel for taking on his very important issue. I also want to thank them for giving me one of the very few opportunities I've had to put on a coat and tie in the last year, and I do look forward to answering your questions in the time remaining.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Leon.

Let me turn now to Elizabeth Neumann.

MS. NEUMANN: Good morning. Thank you to the committee for, to the Commission for inviting me.

I'm Elizabeth Neumann. I'm a Senior Advisor to the National Immigration Forum on national security matters, and I'm a former DHS

Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism and Threat Prevention during the Trump administration.

It was during my tenure at DHS that I oversaw screening and vetting policy, including efforts to strengthen vetting of refugees. So I appreciate the opportunity to address the Commission on ways to protect U.S. national security through a more robust refugee admissions program.

During my time at DHS, I became convinced that the logic posed by the previous administration had several flaws. In particular, there was an overstatement of the threat and a misunderstanding of the enhancements to our screening and vetting systems that had been undertaken since 2011, many of which Director Rodriguez just referred to.

In fact, many of the examples used as evidence that there were holes in the system reflect individuals that had entered the U.S. five to ten years earlier and did not have the benefit of those enhancements to our vetting capabilities.

This is not to say that there's not still work to be done, and I will always advocate for strong security standards, but I think it's really important in this moment to recalibrate our approach to potential security risks and educate the American public about the many national security benefits refugees and immigrants provide to our country.

Today, there are more than 80 million individuals forcibly displaced from their homes worldwide--the highest level displacement ever on record.

And the vast majority, 85 percent, are being hosted in developing regions with 27 percent living in U.N. defined least-developed countries that face significant economic and infrastructure challenges and often have active terrorist movements within their borders.

In such economically and politically unstable environments, forcibly displaced individuals are vulnerable prey to ideological

extremism and abusive exploitation. A survey conducted by the U.S. Institute of Peace found that forcibly displaced individuals in Afghanistan were more likely to be directly approached by the Taliban for radicalization.

Other studies have shown the preexistence of militant groups and the inhumane conditions within refugee camps create protection issues and facilitate the radicalization process. Therefore, it is crucial for the sake of U.S. national security interests to efficiently conduct security vetting procedures and expediently resettle refugees into a safe environment.

Despite recent rhetoric, refugees are the most thoroughly vetted individuals who come to the United States, but we have to move faster. The sometimes decade-long wait for resettlement is not only inhumane, but it increases an individual's susceptibility to being radicalized.

However, over the last four years, the U.S. has acted against its own national security

interests and retreated from the growing refugee challenge with policies rooted in xenophobia and discrimination, and as a whole, the current global system has proved insufficient in addressing the growing number of forcibly displaced persons.

By all accounts, the Biden administration intends to begin repairing the damage and reasserting U.S. leadership in welcoming refugees. I support the administration's stated goals of increasing the refugee ceiling and addressing the root causes that lead to displacement, and in order to achieve these goals, without creating vulnerabilities to our national security, we need to strengthen the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program foundationally with immediate investments in personnel, technology and process improvements that will allow for the rapid scaling of the program.

We can help build capacity by strengthening the National Vetting Center and enhancing our refugee processing capabilities, including investments to address the backlog of

Iraqis, who risked their lives to help Americans, awaiting approval as P-2 refugees.

Doing what is operationally feasible now, increasing operational capacity for the future, and moving towards a multi-year planning approach would help create a secure and sustainable path forward for refugee admissions.

The U.S. has a storied history as a global leader and beacon of hope in providing refuge to individuals fleeing persecution. It is time to reengage with our allies to address the growing number of forcibly displaced persons, both as a matter of principle and because it is in our national security interests.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Ms. Neumann.

Let me last turn to, last but certainly not least, to Murad Ismael.

MR. ISMAEL: Hello. Good morning. Thank

you for having me. I would like first to thank USCIRF for the exceptional work in advancing the cause of religious minorities globally.

USCIRF has been really one of the strong voices for the Yazidi community over the past years since the genocide. The United States also has stood with the Yazidi community over the past two administrations, and the support has been bipartisan although in two different ways.

After six-and-a-half years from commencement of the genocide against the Yazidi community, 65 percent of the Yazidis of the population of Sinjar remain displaced, which is up to 210,000, and mostly they are in the IDP camps in the Kurdish region.

There is also 120 to 140 or 50,000 have returned to Sinjar. Nearly 70,000 have taken refuge or migrated from Iraq to other countries. Most of them have made it to Europe. However, there is still about 1,200 Yazidi Syrians in Lebanon, and they are from Afrin mostly.

There's about 1,000 Yazidis in Turkey. There's about 1,500 in Greece, and several hundreds of Yazidi Syrians in Iraq.

I've visited the Yazidis of Lebanon as well as the Yazidis of Greece, and the situation in these two countries also were very different and difficult.

The Yazidi community continues to endure unimaginable suffering, as well as other minorities of Iraq, such as the Christians, the Kaka'is, the Serbians, the Shabaks, the other minorities in the areas that are called disputed areas.

For the Yazidis, you know, even people who go back to Sinjar, not all stay there. So per UNHCR, we have about 2,200 Yazidis who have actually returned to the IDP camps because life in Sinjar was not possible. Issues in Sinjar continue, administration and security, and the agreement, the Sinjar Agreement, that is known, has not been implemented fully.

Per IOM, the challenges to the return are

a lot, including the problem with housing. A lot of the houses were destroyed and were never rebuilt or supported to be rebuilt. There is also lack of jobs, opportunities. The unemployment is up to 80 percent in this area. Lack of basic services. Many challenges persist.

Also, because the Yazidis feel that justice for the genocide was never, was never put in place, that people feel justice was never, it never happened.

So after you lose 10,000, 12,000 of your people, and you think the justice is not happening, the emotional part of that is extremely, extremely strong when you think about returning back and rebuilding your lives.

The other issues include the Yazidi community really lost everything they possessed or almost everything they possessed. So it's really difficult to go back and rebuild their area. And even, you know, the challenges go deep to even the mass graves. Only last week, we were able to bury

104 of the Yazidis from the Kocho. We still have thousands of people who are not buried, who are in the exposed mass graves, and this process traumatizing the Yazidi community every time, every time it happens.

So the trauma from the genocide is really a series of events that are taking place.

For the Yazidis in the IDP camps, their conditions in the situation also have worsened because of the issue of the COVID and also because of the financial issues in the Kurdish region, and mostly, most of the civilian employees of the Kurdish region have not been paid for months, and the really affects the overall situation of IDPs as well as the host community.

I also foresee that the return of the 210,000 Yazidis from the IDP will be a very long and challenging process and probably never happen in the way you want. So at least half to two-thirds of the Yazidis probably will stay in the camps given the situation in Sinjar has not been

stabilized.

So the Yazidi community, whether they are today refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, or Greece, or the vulnerable families inside Iraq, and especially the people who work for the U.S. Army--I myself benefited from the U.S. program, SIV program, and I was able to come here, but there are thousands of people who couldn't benefit from the program, and included one of our employees. About four years ago, she even was given an appointment, but she never was able to come to the U.S.

So there is dire need for resettlement within these programs. The Yazidi community in the U.S. is very small community. We are about 5,000 people, but the effect of the Yazidi community in the U.S. has been very strong, and the Yazidis of America were the strongest voice for the Yazidis in Iraq during the genocide. And the more Yazidis are in a position to support their families, it's really resilience to the communities. It's not something negative, in my opinion.

So based on that, I recommend that the U.S. within the next few years, two or three years, finish the backlog on the refugees P-2 program, as well as SIV, as well as the vulnerable families, whether they are women and widows who lost their husbands and their family members, and who currently don't have jobs.

And I've met a lot of these people. It's really almost unbearable when a woman has lost her husband and now has to take care of four to five people or children. How would she do that given that the unemployment is too high and the situation is just so complex in the IDP camps.
And even for those who have returned.

The effect on the Yazidi communities also on the trauma level. So since the beginning of this year, 13 Yazidis, at least 13, have committed suicide, including one this week, a girl this week, and yesterday a Yazidi man, at the age of 50, who shot himself.

So the Yazidi community is broken, and I

would say the same thing for the religious minorities are broken. Even when they are not refugees, they are IDPs. Even if they return to their homes, they are still vulnerable.

So a great deal of aid and support has come to the Yazidi communities since the genocide, and we are grateful for all the help that was given, and especially from the United States, which really contributed to the biggest part.

I also have a concern that with the COVID and with the lack of funding that will go to the areas, that the Yazidi, also Yazidi NGOs who really played a key role into building resilience--human suffering more and be able to continue, and the leadership that was built within their community, will lose it if the issue of lack of funding and support that continues to go on.

And I would really also like to commend the USAID support for the Yazidi NGOs that played a really key role.

Finally, I would like to say this, that

the Yazidi community is one of the small ancient religious minorities in the Middle East, a community that suffered killing, enslavement, displacement, abuse and torture, for no reason of their own but for who they are. For that, I believe the United States and the world should continue to offer help to rebuild their homeland and to offer resettlement opportunities to those in need of resettlement.

In fact, resettlement creates resiliency within the community. I therefore also again respectfully ask that the U.S. resettle 25,000 Yazidis over in the next years.

On my personal story, too, I came here. I was able to learn English. I was able to go to school. I was able to help my community when the community fell into genocide, and I think a lot of the Yazidis outside whether they are in Germany or the U.S. have played a key role in helping the community come out of this genocide and be stronger.

Thank you for your time.

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Murad, I just wanted to say that I think so often about the time that Commissioner Maenza and I had in Iraq five years after the genocide with so many of those who had stories that have stayed with us about the importance of those fleeing religious violence and persecution, like the Yazidi community has experienced, and how much there's a need for safety and a place for them to find a home.

So with that, I'm going to turn to Chair Manchin, and thank you.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Well, thank you, Vice Chair Bhargava and to all of our speakers, for the amazing information and evidence that you have brought to us this morning.

I want to quickly ask the first question. Jenny, I'm going to you. In your comments early on, you talked about I think over a million Rohingya refugees, and that many, I think, I believe, if I heard correctly, you said over half

of those are children.

So my question is what can the U.S. do better in humanitarian efforts, do better in terms of dealing with these large number of children refugees that are being forced out of countries?

MS. YANG: Well, thank you so much for that question.

So the number of refugees that are Rohingya that are in this specific area of Bangladesh is nearly one million, and over half of them are children. And it's important to note that worldwide, a lot of the refugees that are displaced are children, and oftentimes they are born into refugee camps or in urban settings, and they will live their entire lives in refugee settings because there are no alternatives, either to return home or to locally integrate in the countries to which they fled.

The situation with the Rohingya from Burma is particularly alarming because we are seeing ongoing displacement of individuals who cannot be

afforded citizenship within Burma and are being forced to flee into communities in Bangladesh and other places in order to find protection.

The United States has really led an effort globally to provide humanitarian assistance through UNHCR and others that are the first responders really at the front-lines in these refugee camps to provide basic shelter and food for these individuals.

But much more is going to be needed, especially for the children for them to be able to go to school and continue their education, which in a lot of times in refugee camps, children are not continuing their education because they're wanting to work and actually provide wages for their family to just survive on a day-to-day basis.

So the need for education of these children is going to continue to be important as well. And we're in a global pandemic in which in many camps around the world, it is very difficult to either socially distance or even to get access

to basic medical care.

The U.N. in partnership with the U.S. are doing basic efforts. For example, in Jordan, there are efforts to vaccinate refugees there, but there will need to be a global campaign, even as the U.S. ramps up vaccinations here, to continue social distancing and to continue access to basic medical care for children and others that are facing daunting medical conditions in these communities.

But in addition to that, I think it's important, even as we provide humanitarian assistance and really focus on the children, to continue their education, that ongoing diplomacy and an attention to the need for human rights in Burma is going to be important.

I know the Biden administration is committed to addressing the situation of Rohingya with the Burmese government, even as there are ongoing detentions and ongoing political conflict even now in that country.

But ongoing diplomacy and anything the

commissioners and others can do to amplify the need, not only to recognize the Rohingya and their right to citizenship in Burma, but also to provide assistance and protection for those who cannot return home is going to be critically important in the years ahead.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you so much, Jenny.

Vice Chair Perkins, do you have a question?

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: I'd like to kind of follow up on the question you asked, but more generally speaking, and I don't mean to pick on Jenny, but I'll ask her or one of our other witnesses can speak to this, but as we've seen this increasing number of refugees globally each year, you know, what, what would you say are the main driving factors, and, in particular, how does religious persecution factor in to the growing number of refugees?

MS. YANG: Well, in a lot of communities around the world, it is unquestionable that many,

the driving reason is political conflict. So, for example, in Syria, you're seeing millions of individuals that are forced from their homes, and what's interesting is that when you meet face-to-face with many of these refugees, they never think that they're going to be a refugee for more than a few months or even a few years.

So I've met refugees with the keys to their homes because they still have the hope that they're eventually going to return home. But what we know about the Syrian conflict is that it's been almost ten years now since that conflict has ensued.

And when you look at the situation of Syria, you have terrorist groups like ISIS, which continue to target religious minorities in those communities, and so these individuals are also joining the many others who are fleeing generalized political conflict, to flee in situations overseas.

And, so, in Venezuela, the Brookings Institute actually issued a report in which they

found that what's happening in Venezuela, they think is going to be the worst refugee crisis, even surpassing Syria right now.

And, so, in Venezuela, you see that the conflict is political, that there continues to be in-fighting within the government, and that has forced many individuals to flee to surrounding areas, and I know Mark at HIAS also has programs there in responding to the humanitarian situation there.

What's challenging to look at the intersection of religious freedom and forced migration is that the U.N. doesn't necessarily note, for example, and publicize their reason why these individuals are fleeing. What we can know from general country situation and international religious freedom reports is that there are many individuals that are fleeing persecution because of their religion.

And a lot of times, it's because of these, you know, small terrorist organizations, and in

some cases, in Pakistan or even North Korea, specific governmental sanctioned actions against religious minorities, it is, that is what is forcing people to flee as well.

And so what you see in a lot of these situations is not only has there been an ongoing lack of religious freedom, which in many countries has been worsening around the world, but the fact that political conflict is exacerbating that, and a lot of these political conflicts do not have any kind of end in sight means that many of these refugees will continue to be in these really dire humanitarian situations, and it will necessitate the U.S. responding accordingly along with other countries as well.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you. Thank you, Chair Manchin.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

Vice Chair Bhargava, do you have a question?

VICE CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, chair.

I have many questions. I will stick to this one. I wanted to ask all the panelists whether there's a sense of, from you as to whether there should be priority processing categories for members of severely persecuted groups?

And in thinking about the criteria for that kind of prioritization, how do we account for, as we were just talking about, differentials and designations of genocide such as for the Rohingya in Burma where that designation is yet to be made?

And then to a point that Elizabeth made earlier, some of the assumptions and the concretization of how certain folks may be security risks and threats and, unfortunately, what we've heard a lot of in recent years, a presumption that persons of certain faiths and communities are not believed and are threats, and so how do we actually recalibrate some of that vetting in thinking about prioritization through the process, given, frankly, the backlogs and the caps?

MR. ISMAEL: If I may go for the answer.

I would say that religious minorities should be given the priority. Given the situation, their situation is extremely different, and look, for example, to the situation where kind of the majority was able to go back to their areas, even though there are complexities and differences, but for minorities, they were not able to go back.

And that, you know, we looked at the Christian community, for example, we looked at the Yazidi community, if you looked at the Kaka'is, if you look to other minorities, they were not able to go back. Also in Syria they are not able to go back. So I think the fact that their situation is different, and they should be given the priority.

There is also this argument of whether minorities should keep their homeland or should resettle in another country, and that's, I always get that. What is better? So I think one thing is what can, what can life be for those who can just cannot have life in their homeland? You know, people cannot go back, people cannot study.

People, I know that a lot of the Yazidi children have left school. I know that a lot of the Yazidis have left--they don't have a job to do. You know, five, ten people sleep in the same tent or in two tents, and so when you talk about, yes, we would like to keep our homeland, and we will keep our homeland.

So if you bring some refugees, and you give them the priority, I think you also are opening possibilities. You know, for example, in the Yazidi community, we have, we have people who do businesses in their areas, who are wealthy and who are more educated and can help the community.

So I think, I think having a specific class for people who are persecuted and who are unable to go back to their homelands, I think that should be a class, and also that should also cover the IDPs, not only the refugees because the only difference really between IDPs and refugees, people who either have little bit of money were able to pass the border, and people who are very poor

couldn't even pass the border, so they are just on the other side of the border, but their circumstances are no better than the refugees.

MR. HETFIELD: I would just add, if I could, as a practical matter, going through the refugee resettlement gauntlet takes so long. I mean first you have to present your story to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, to show you're a refugee.

Then you have to present it again to UNHCR to demonstrate you qualify for resettlement. Then you have to tell it again to the United States Resettlement Support Center. Then you have to tell it again to a Homeland Security officer.

And this is un--causes the process to be impossibly long, and it makes it so that it's no longer a rescue program.

With religious minorities, especially people who come from countries of particular concern, you should be able to skip some of those steps and just get the person in--be able to skip

UNHCR and have a Priority-2 referral that allows you to get right in front of a Resettlement Support Center to apply for the refugee program without having to go through the multiple UNHCR layers.

So we're big advocates of P-2, especially for religious minorities, and oftentimes religious and ethnic minorities are inseparable like the Rohingya, like Iraqi Chaldeans, but we have to look at all these steps in the refugee program and see which ones just add time and which ones add value.

And in the case of many persecuted religious minorities, there's a lot of time added but not value.

MS. YANG: Yeah, and I would add to that as well that I think it's important to emphasize even as we're taking a religious persecution lens to ensure that the program remains a program that prioritizes those who are most vulnerable.

Oftentimes, that has meant that those who are fleeing religious persecution are the most vulnerable, and so even in the recent executive

order in which President Biden is actually recommending specific groups for special designation to the program, he includes several religious minorities in that grouping. Actually more than any other categories he mentions are religious minorities from Iraq and Syria, are the Rohingya and Uighurs coming from China.

So it's a recognition that the fact that they are fleeing religious persecution and happen to be the most vulnerable.

And so I think the P-2 designation is a step in the right direction because it allows individuals that are very vulnerable to circumvent the U.N. process and be referred and processed directly as a group to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

At the same time, I think, as Mark mentioned, there are significant hurdles right now to overcome, including quickening up processing and ensuring that we have the right resources to ramp up capacity to process these individuals that are

going to continue to be challenging for us even as we consider these individuals.

I would also just again highlight the fact that there are small groups of religious minorities in many places around the world. There is a small group of Pakistani Christians that have been living in Thailand for many, many years. These are mostly Ahmadi Muslims and a small number of Christians. I think this would be another group that we believe could be prime for resettlement because they cannot go home, and they are having a very challenging time in Thailand right now to be provided protection.

So these are individuals we believe, in addition to Uighurs, Rohingyas. and others, that we believe can be special groups designated for admission to the U.S. as refugees.

MS. NEUMANN: I was going to pick up on the aspect of your question about the vetting and the security.

I think one of the challenges we saw over

the last five years, and rightly so, the security community recognized that the flow of refugees and others out of Syria in 2015 and 2016 posed a great challenge for Europe and potentially for the United States, and so there were, you know, efforts that were put into place to better understand potentially did we have anybody associated with ISIS that moved into those flows?

As we have enhanced our capabilities related to vetting, we detect more potential derogatory information. And the more you detect, the harder it is to assess, especially if the information is tangential, at best, and it becomes difficult, absent additional information, to be able to figure out if the person that you're looking at is, in fact, a security risk.

So I think, one of the witnesses pointed to some of the declines in certain categories of individuals being admitted into the refugee program. Certainly some of that had to do with, you know, policies that the administration had put

in place related to nationality, but some of it also had to do with increasing sophistication around our vetting.

And without getting into classified channels, what I'm encouraged by is that the Biden administration seems to recognize that. In the executive order, he directs that the SAO process be reviewed. He directs what I think will allow for kind of a robust conversation, and I address this in a paper that I put out in November, in December, with the National Immigration Forum, that it's time to relook at what our risk tolerance is.

And, look, I'm a counterterrorism professional. I'm never going to suggest that we should not vet people, but the reality is we always accept a certain modicum of risk by the fact that we allow people from other countries to travel and visit or immigrate here, and no other population is put through the wringer quite the same way as refugees are.

But when it comes to the refugee

population, the appetite seems to be a zero-tolerance risk posture, and I understand why we started there, but now that we're a little bit more advanced in our vetting capabilities, now might be the time to have a more sophisticated look at how we calibrate our risk tolerance.

If you do that, then it becomes easier for certain religious minorities coming from countries that sadly are intermixed with, you know, active terrorist groups, it becomes a little bit easier to admit more or at least get them through the security clearance process a little bit faster.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Okay. If there are no other comments on that question, Commissioner Bauer, do you have a question?

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Yes, thank you, Chairman Manchin.

First of all, really edifying testimony from everyone and very useful for the Commission, for the commissioners. So thank you very much. And I commend you for the work that you all do in

the field that you do it in.

I've heard different numbers. They're all overwhelming. I saw some material in the last couple of days about as many as 80 million people around the world may have been driven out of their homes and then something like 25, 27 million fit all the definitions of being officially a refugee.

I guess the first question I would have is as far as the number of people admitted to the United States as refugees, isn't that by necessity always going to be a very small percentage of the total, sadly, the total refugee population around the world?

So I'd be interested if each of you were president, what level you would set that cap at?

And, then, second of all, whatever that number is, assuming it still would be a small percentage, isn't the real issue here what the United States with our power and influence can do to deal with what's causing this?

And my sense is that in a lot of places

around the world, it's either having Communist regimes like China, which could care less about human rights and religious liberty, or it's regimes like Iran and Assad in Syria and, sadly, increasingly, Turkey, that are engaged in policies that necessarily will end up creating more refugees. Doesn't that argue for a robust foreign policy that confronts those places?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I can start a little bit down that road. I mean I think you're rightly pointing to a very large denominator of which we are a very tiny numerator, still with the potential to be one of the biggest in the world.

One of the things that absolutely needs to happen, and I happened to speed-read a paper by Ms. Neumann right after her testimony where she talks about this, and that is the importance of the United States engaging in diplomatic efforts to increase global participation in offering refuge.

That's something that we had started to work on in the latter part of the Obama

administration. I think there was immensely more room than anything that we were able to accomplish, but that's got to be a really critical part of the effort.

I think you're also right in the sense that we do have a responsibility both to ourselves and to the refugees to address the underlying conditions that are creating various flows of both refugees and asylum seekers. You know, I think history has shown us that absent that, those flows will continue.

Neither of those things are going to happen overnight. You know, you asked us when, you know, what's the right number? So my family came here at a time when we were literally admitting close to a million combination of refugees and asylum seekers, people coming from Cuba like my family, other parts of the Iron Curtain. So that's something that we can do as a country, but there needs to be capacity to do that.

Right now, frankly, the 125,000 that

President Biden has established as a goal probably exceeds, well exceeds, our actual capacity as we're speaking today. So I think the number should be quite a lot higher, but we also need to be mindful of the collective investment that both government and the non-profit community will need to make in order to approach a much more robust number than the one we have right now.

MR. HETFIELD: Yeah, I would just add that Commissioner Bauer just asked a very big question. And it is, the United States and the international community do always address refugee mass displacement situations with a three-pronged strategy and with three solutions.

The first solution is to make it so that refugees can return home so that requires addressing the root causes.

The second is facilitating local integration in the countries of first asylum. You know, over 80 percent of refugees are hosted in developing countries, many of which are the poorest

countries. So that requires a lot of humanitarian assistance.

And then the third solution is resettlement to the United States and other third countries, which is the last solution, not because it's the least valuable, but it is the least available.

And so you try to make sure that when you resettle refugees, it demonstrates responsibility sharing, it sends that kind of a message, and it can also be used in certain refugee situations strategically to help those refugees who are not being resettled.

And so that is the ideal use of resettlement. When you're resettling 15,000 refugees a year in a global refugee crisis, you can't really apply resettlement strategically. But in 1980, when the refugee program started, the United States resettled 207,112 refugees in a single year, and when you're resettling that kind of a number, you really can make an impact if you

continue to show that level of support and commitment to sharing responsibility with host countries.

And we were a smaller country then. The refugee population was smaller then, and yet agencies like HIAS and our eight other national refugee agencies, like World Relief, and the United States government, did not have a lot of difficult absorbing and integrating that population, many of whom came from enemy countries, like the Soviet Union and Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia.

And yet there were no security incidents that I'm aware of related to that massive resettlement effort. It was a real success story, and so I would say that 207,000 would be a good number, but it's one that has to be worked up to.

MS. YANG: And I would also add to that that one of the recommendations that we've had at World Relief and in the larger refugee advocacy community is that the U.S. should take about ten percent of the world's global need when it comes to

resettlement. So if the U.N. right now is estimating that 1.44 million refugees are in need of resettlement, then ten percent of that would be around 140,000 refugees, and as the President is now proposing 125,000, we are getting closer to about ten percent of that share.

I would also emphasize that I think you're right that most refugees will never be resettled. The U.S. has resettled less than half of one percent of the world's refugees. But when we do resettle refugees, it is a mutually reinforcing message to countries around the world that they should also keep their doors open to those who are fleeing religious persecution.

And so even as the U.S. provides unprecedented levels of humanitarian assistance to those refugees who will not be resettled and who will remain in refugee camps and in urban settings around the world, by keeping this small lifeline of protection open to those who cannot go home or locally integrate really affords other countries an

opportunity to step up to the plate as well.

In the past several years, when the U.S. resettlement numbers were declining, there was a related decline in the number of slots available from other countries that were opening their doors to refugees as well, and so the ability for the U.S. to lead when it comes to refugee resettlement has a direct impact on other countries also offering protection and resettlement to their countries as well.

So it's a really critical time for the U.S. to lead in that conversation as well as to provide a humanitarian assistance for the large majority of those who will never be able to be resettled as well.

MS. NEUMANN: I would like to add, I agree with everything that all of the witnesses have said about the importance of demonstrating U.S. leadership and how that helps us not just from a humanitarian perspective to get other countries to also do their share, but it also helps us from a

national security perspective.

When you see the United States retreat from the moral high ground, it does impact our ability to do everything from the way the military works today is usually not for the U.S. to lead, but it's to work with partner countries and encourage partner countries to go after terrorists in their neighborhood, the same thing with diplomatic measures, and when we are not seen as exerting that moral leadership, those partnerships start to collapse.

And I watched that first-hand on any number of fronts over the last four years. But it is a drop in the bucket. It does not solve the problem but allows the United States to be able to be seen as a partner, and it also allow enemies to not characterize us, or not to be as successful in characterizing us as not caring, and therefore worthy of their hatred, worthy of targeting us for our, you know, for our sins; right.

So that's one important reason why we need

to continue asserting leadership here in welcoming people to our country. Another aspect, you had asked about the numbers. I defer to my colleagues, but I think we can go much higher as long as we actually do the investments.

Government is really great about setting policy vision and really bad about actually executing well. We are, like USCIS is woefully stuck in the 20th century paper-based. They have a modernization program underway right now, but that was impacted by the fact that because we kind of shut down immigration altogether with the pandemic, they're not collecting fees, and their entire budget is pretty much fee based.

And so funding for the IT modernization project kind of got slow-rolled. They had to go to Congress. They were able to cobble things together, but, you know, I think Congress might want to look at is there a way to make the U.S. Refugee Program and asylee programs more sustainable so that we don't go through the ebb and

flow of the fee funds, which is fine to be, you know, there are some benefits to being fee-funded, but I think the lessons from the last couple years have demonstrated that if we are going to commit to a higher ceiling, we can't have the up and down number, which is why in one of my papers I argued we need a multi-year planning.

We need to move past this year it's going to be this, and next year it's going to be, you know, we'll decide next year. We should be able to project what are we trying to do over the next five years?

So I'd love to see us become a little bit more of, you know, effective government and actually plan and commit to those plans so that partners that are represented here as witnesses, as well as government agencies, can better plan for the future and, you know, it's more cost efficient that way.

Here's the last thing, and this is going to sound kind of antithetical to everything I'm

advocating for because I do think we need to go higher than 125,000 once the infrastructure is there.

Historically, when the U.S. has welcomed more immigrants, including in the 1980s, as was referenced earlier, there is a backlash by certain communities in the United States, and in particular in the 1980s, the welcoming of refugees from Vietnam and Laos led to some of the anti-government extremist movements that I have spent way too much time talking about in recent weeks.

White supremacists, in particular, and anti-government militias are very adept at creating an enemy anytime you see an influx of immigrants, regardless of whether they're refugees or something else.

So I would encourage this body to learn from the past, not that there were mistakes made, but how do we do a better job of explaining to the American people that welcoming refugees is actually good for our economy, that all of the evidence

shows that there is less crime coming from a population of refugees than from the American population.

There are good stories to tell, but we have to make sure that we educate the American public if we're going to do increases because there are those that I believe are evil in their ideology, but they will use this as an opportunity to create more grievance and potentially try to mobilize people to violent extremism.

We're dealing with a very difficult moment in our country as it pertains to domestic violent extremism so we don't want to play into their hands. If we properly educate the American people, tell good stories, help them understand what this looks like and the amazing process that is used to welcome people to our country, I think we can counteract that.

MS. YANG: If I can just add quickly that in the United States, as World Relief, we have over the past year worked with over a thousand churches,

mostly evangelical churches, to welcome these refugees, and many of these churches we work with feel like it is a core expression of their faith to welcome those who are fleeing persecution.

And so a rising refugee ceiling is not just an indication and a foreign policy and humanitarian goal that we have, but it is a direct indication from the communities we've worked with across the United States that they desire to welcome more refugees into their community knowing what is happening around the world, especially with persecuted Christians that have nowhere else to go.

So I think it is a both/and providing assistance and welcoming refugees, and they are mutually reinforcing goals to help those fleeing persecution.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

Commissioner Maenza, do you have a question?

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: Sure. Thanks so

much to all of you. I've been still learning so much, and I've been so impressed, and I just want to reiterate that, you know, I was meeting with UNHCR when the U.S. had just slashed our refugee cap, and they were telling me about how all the other countries were also slashing their caps, kind of in response to us, like we've given them coverage to do the same.

And to me, it really sent a message to those authoritarian regimes that their people don't have value, that if we don't want them, if no one wants them, you know, and especially dangerous for religious minorities. So I think this is an important moment for us to show some leadership and hopefully other countries will feel obliged to also receive more of these vulnerable populations.

But my question today is about private sponsorship of refugees. I know Canada and others have, you know, sponsored this in a way where communities have raised money to be able to bring in refugee families, and even families have come

together to bring in other refugee families.

I know we used to do this in the past. Would our laws have to change to allow that to happen?

MR. HETFIELD: I'll start. Our laws would not have to change. We're frankly a little frustrated with the priority that community sponsorship has been given recently because we already have the ability to do that with the existing refugee resettlement system.

And, as Jenny indicated, we have 600 Jewish congregations that are anxious to resettle refugees and can do so under the existing framework.

Jenny has even more than that representing the evangelical community. So we already have a public-private sponsorship. I think making that work better and encouraging that kind of private sponsorship, especially in places where there are no resettlement agencies, would be a very positive thing.

What would be really great, if we could use private sponsorship to expedite the reunification of refugee families. That's our biggest frustration, is that it takes years to get refugee family members, even immediate family members, reunited with their loved ones, and nothing is a bigger hindrance to the healing that refugees have to go through.

If we could use private sponsorship to fast-track these family reunion cases, then that would be really welcome. So that's where I would encourage some attention. There's a lot of leeway that the administration has to do that without legislation.

I think all the things that, all of the improvements that we're talking about don't even require legislation although the Refugee Act was written in 1980. So it is due for an update.

MS. YANG: I think as one of the resettlement agencies, we do welcome conversations around what community sponsorship and private

sponsorship would look like. I think the Canadian model and other models are a bit different, and so I think we need to explore the cost of what that could look like.

But, obviously, as Mark said, there is already community consultation and sponsorship baked into the current resettlement model, and so the recent proposed refugee admissions does offer a P-4 category where there is a pilot program exploring what private sponsorship could look like.

And so we do look forward to working with the administration on what that could look like and seeing what the possibilities could be around sponsorship.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: This is really the administration's discretion at this point in time to allow the private sponsorship?

MS. YANG: Yes.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: Okay.

MS. YANG: Yeah.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Okay. We are winding

down, but we have a couple more commissioners. I know they'd like to ask a question.

So, Commissioner Carr, do you have a question?

COMMISSIONER CARR: Thank you so much, Chair Manchin.

I just want to tell you what incredible work you all are involved in. Wow. So rewarding. And thank you, as a fellow citizen, thank you so much for what you're doing.

Leon, you mentioned in your comments that one of the most rewarding parts of your career thus far has been helping thousands of refugees settle in our country. My question, many of your colleagues have commented on the vetting process. How do you believe we could improve the vetting process?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think the most critical way, it needs to be basically a process of continuous improvement. In other words, it needs to be reexamined in real time as threats come and

go.

And I think there is something that Ms. Neumann said that is so focused, is you've got to be addressing the threat that actually exists, not the one that's imagined, not the one that's driven by media or that's driven by prejudice. Because there really are threats out there, but we need to have a vetting process that addresses that.

And so I think the key is for it to be a process of continuous improvement. I think it needs to be an investment in the professionals who operate that process, whether it's the refugee services officers at USCIS, the various intelligence, intelligence integrating agencies that support the work that they do.

I think the efforts need to be, for it to fortify all of those parts of the process and to pay real attention as to what is the threat today, and what is a tool that will actually help us assess whether an individual fits within that threat.

Too much of what we do is associational. You made the wrong call to the wrong person or you have the wrong cousin. That kind of approach to vetting needs to be looked at a little bit more, with a little bit more of a piercing eye before we make that a sort of a cornerstone of how we vet.

COMMISSIONER CARR: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

Commissioner Turkel.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you very much. I wish to begin by thanking our witnesses. Someone who has been working on these issues over nearly two decades, I have really appreciated the suggestions and knowledge and experience that you are sharing with us.

As Director Rodriguez, I am also beneficiary of the U.S. Refugee Program. I was granted asylum here in the United States and made home and enjoying my freedom.

The question that Commissioner Bauer asked has been something that I have been thinking about

a lot. The international community just in the last ten years experiencing, actually two of them, three of them already happening, as we speak, three genocidal campaigns, against the Yazidis, Rohingyas, and now the Uighurs.

That's the reason that we have 80 million displaced population because the international community repeatedly failing to address this. Political interests, political expediency has been leading the thinking of these policymakers to fail to act. Even to this day, the world is trading with nations like China that is in the midst of genocidal campaign.

With respect to--and I appreciate as a Uighur American myself, I appreciate the recommendations, including Uighur refugee settlement. The Uighurs are not exactly the type of refugees that have been, that should be considered as displaced population. There is no departure, at least in the last four years. The Chinese, the way of dealing with the Uighurs, have

a different perspective.

One, they don't allow the Uighurs to leave. And if they manage to leave earlier, they use diplomatic, economic influence to bring them back. As the case in Kazakhstan and Thailand, Cambodia, in Egypt, we may see large number of Uighurs being picked up and sent back to China.

So, in the face of this kind of diplomatic operations orchestrated and effectively engaged by China, we may run into a serious issue in the vetting process because there is so much derogatory information involved with Uighur refugees. If Director Rodriguez and Ms. Neumann could comment on that?

How do we overcome derogatory information? I'd like to see several thousand Uighur refugees settled in the United States, but the home countries and the host countries have bad information about the Uighurs. How do we overcome this?

And number two--this is for Director

Rodriguez--I've done some asylum work, and I do know it for a fact that I have some people that I know that have been waiting for affirmative asylum interview since 2015.

So what do we do to take care of the Uighur refugees or refugees already here, Syrian refugees, the Kazakh refugees, and the Rohingya refugees? The asylum application process, this interim process, literally stopped. So what do we do about these issues?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So I can start on one issue we were--I want to return to one issue that I think overarches both of your questions that we were talking about earlier.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Yeah.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: And that is the need for a collective investment in the, both the refugee and asylum programs. Neither refugees or refugee applicants who are asylum seekers pay a fee for their processing for the simple reason that most of them are typically not in a situation where they

have the financial ability, but also because it is something that historically as a country, we've seen as a moral obligation.

We place the burdens of paying for their admission on other seekers of immigration benefits, whether it's applicants for naturalization, green card seekers, what have you. That just doesn't make sense, and it also reflects a lack of a collective social investment by the American people in something that's core to our values.

And so I think the first thing is Congress needs to get real here and make a real decision as to what investment it's going to make in this.

As far as how do you overcome derogatory information? I think we're in the process right now of a reexamination of what derogatory information actually means. And what we do with information that perhaps raises a suspicion, it raises a concern, but it doesn't necessarily cross the line to anything that I as somebody who lives in an evidence-based environment as a lawyer would

really consider to be ultimately actionable information.

And I want to share one last thing, and I really would love to hear what Elizabeth has to say about this. Probably the biggest delays that we witnessed during the time that we were raising our refugee admissions was individuals who were neither clear admits or clear denies.

They were people who had a little shred of information that could be completely innocent, but nobody felt the confidence to be able, given everything that was going on around us, the confidence to be able to make a decision in those cases. We're going to have to figure out what to do about those cases because those are the ones that end up with something that looks a little bit questionable, but nobody is able to actually make a decision about that individual.

So that's something that I think, you know, as we sort of reexamine the vetting process, we got to figure out what we're going to do in

those cases. And I'm not sure honestly that as I sit here I have a perfect answer for the committee on that one.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you.

MS. NEUMANN: A couple of thoughts.

One, and I can't give you, I don't have specific knowledge about the populations you referenced and how the government might be dealing with them, and if I did, it probably would be classified, but I do know from other conversations, one of my jobs was international information sharing, and as it pertains to things like watch listing, you know, identity credentialing, you know, our interrelationships with Interpol.

And it is a thing that all of us like-minded countries have to deal with, that certain governments cannot be trusted for the information that they provide the international community.

So one reassurance would be that it is a known problem, and it is a problem that exists across the panoply of various screening and vetting

challenges that we face, and that there are systems in place to understand the source behind the information and to determine whether we think they're a credible source, and from many countries, we just don't think they're credible sources, and so we don't take their information.

Now that doesn't mean that there couldn't potentially be a problem for the populations you referenced, but there is some reassurance that we look at the source of the data before we ingest it into our systems to be able to, you know, tell us whether somebody poses a risk to us.

Other things that I think might help in the future, and we've already talked a little bit about the importance of recalibrating our zero risk tolerance and what that looks like, and I think Director Rodriguez kind of referred to some of those challenges that adjudicators have in trying to figure out, you know, is that little bit of knowledge enough that it actually is a risk or, you know, it's probably fine and how we recalibrate.

So I think that's an important conversation that the Biden administration will have, the results of which I'm not sure that they would necessarily announce because it's internal analysts' security conversations, and you all may want to consider having a classified conversation with maybe the National Vetting Governance Board to express your concerns.

That might be an effective way to ensure that they are hearing first-hand from you, and they can take that into account because they are one of the entities that was told to go and look at this process in the executive order.

A couple of other thoughts. The National Vetting Center, which the National Vetting Governance Board oversees, it has in the pipeline the asylee population is what they were working on. And then the next population was the refugees. And there has been a slowdown. Some of it is pandemic related. Some of it is the natural slowdown that bureaucracies do when you are in an election year,

and nobody quite knows what direction somebody is going to go.

So I'm hopeful that it's part of the review that President Biden has directed, that they will send signals that they need to get going with the asylee population and the refugee population, incorporating them into the National Vetting Center.

Now why? Though it had the label of "extreme vetting," and it scared a lot of people because--and it's understandable why people had concerns--the vetting center concept was developed years ago when it was actually--and its original form was in the 9/11 Commission Report from 2004. This is simply taking unclassified information and comparing it to classified information holdings.

It really is a technology solution, and it's about the business processes to make sure that when you're doing the comparisons and you're getting matches, that the adjudicators who usually operate in an unclassified environment have access

to see the classified information so that the adjudicators make the decision, not a machine, not the security community.

So it's about the business processes, it's about technology, and it's eventually about making sure that we are using all relevant legal information that we have to make sure that the people coming into our country are safe.

They have successfully done this for those individuals that apply through the visa waiver program, for what's called an ESTA, and we saw some mild benefits, but important benefits, and I think the primary benefit to the asylee and refugee community is that the vetting will go faster. Once you automate what is largely manual, you won't have as lengthy of delays.

But as the director mentioned, usually the longest delays are those that are on the bubble, and you have to--you know, the human judgment comes in. You have to go deeper and dive deeper. For those that are a clear "yes" or a clear "no," that

process should speed up.

Now there are other types of checks that USCIS does that are not the security-related checks that still have a manual aspect to it, but I think you will at least help with some of that backlog because the security thing will no longer be the long pole in the tent.

The last thing I think that helps us in the long-term is as--it's going to sound kind of counterintuitive, but it doesn't have to do with vetting, and it has to do with our capabilities inside the country to help individuals, not just the reintegration piece, but largely to have a prevention capability in our country, and that's probably a deeper topic I'm happy to share some information with you on.

But when we started this effort a couple of years ago--Congress has funded it--when you have the ability to help individuals who are on a pathway towards violence, intervene with them before they become a law enforcement problem, then

the security community feels a little bit more comfortable taking risks because then we have prevention capabilities built into our society that, you know, take some of the burden off of law enforcement, who worry that if somebody shows up here and we miss something, and it becomes a law enforcement problem.

So that's a longer-term fix, but one that I think is really important on the integration side to make sure that we can reassure the security community when they're vetting that there are other layers in our security posture to prevent somebody from carrying out an attack.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Yes, this is very important because unlike the traditional refugee situation, most of the Uighur refugees are at their homes, not at the refugee centers, because they had valid visa, valid status, traveling, studying, residing, own business, and then, boom, under the pressure of the Chinese government, for example, the home country, the host country put pressure on

them not extending their stay, and then R4 status, and they cannot go to the UNHCR because UNHCR has a history of collaborating with the local government, even in some instances allowing Chinese to take refugees back to China.

So, it's a big dilemma, but this is very helpful. I will share this with the people who work on these issues regularly. Thank you.

CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

And what a wonderful way to kind of bring all of this back together. Elizabeth, thank you for your final comments there, and certainly, Commissioner Turkel.

I think what it blends here is the point of our whole conversation today, that while it is about processing and vetting and security issues, and relocation and assimilation, at the end of the day, it is about people, people fleeing their lives because of religious persecution, certainly other things, but our focus is around religious persecution.

We're talking about children, parents, older adults, people fleeing their lives, and each of you today, the panelists, are people that deal with these issues, people fleeing from genocide, and how we deal with those people in a humane way that allows them to relocate and assimilate into a community.

So thank you all so much for the work that you are doing on behalf of the 80 million that we sort of call the 80 million refugees around this world and your efforts to improve their status and how they are able to relocate.

Certainly, to the staff and our commissioners at USCIRF, this is an issue, which we will continue to work with with our community and with others. It is important to USCIRF. It is one of our foundations. As I mentioned in the beginning, our founders, many were refugees, as you all have talked about today in your comments, and so this is something important to us personally and certainly collectively as USCIRF.

And to all of the people that joined us today for this hearing, thank you for participating.

Certainly any further information, you can go to USCIRF website with questions or for more information, but thank you all for being a part of this, for joining us, and again a most gracious, gracious thank you to our panelists for their excellent presentations and the interactive discussion that we were able to have today.

Thank you all. Good-bye.

[Whereupon, at 12:12 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]